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ABSTRACT

Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Ira Shor have been criticized as theorists not concerned with the institutional realities of American education (e.g., grades and standardized exams). This paper argues that these teacher-researchers speak to the issues encountered in developing electronic portfolios in high schools and colleges. The imposition of high-stakes assessments from outside of the classroom (often legislated by state governments and enforced by state departments of education) creates environments where concerned teachers must teach toward the tests. Yet in classrooms where computer-mediated writing occupies a good deal of the students' time, more and more teachers and researchers are finding that student creativity and risk-taking do not directly correspond to standardized assessment. The most recent advances in electronic portfolio assessment, however, demonstrate that communication-based writing evaluation can be developed not only in individual classrooms, but also across university writing programs or throughout state education systems. This paper briefly sketches the practices developing in electronic portfolio systems and shows how these methods of assessment address concerns about validity and how they change the tenor of the conversation when discussing reliability. Drawing on Brian Huot's ideas in "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment," the paper suggests that electronic portfolio assessment can both reinvigorate critical pedagogy and can benefit by addressing the challenges raised by Freire, hooks and Shor. Contains 20 references. (Author/RS)

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Electronic Portfolios and Critical Pedagogy (NCTE 2002)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Abstract: Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Ira Shor have been criticized as theorists not concerned with the institutional realities of American education (e.g., grades and standardized exams). I argue that these teacher-researchers speak to the issues encountered in developing electronic portfolios in high schools and colleges.

The imposition of high-stakes assessments from outside of the classroom—often legislated by state governments and enforced by state departments of education—creates environments where concerned teachers must teach toward the tests. Yet in classrooms where computer-mediated writing occupies a good deal of the students' time, more and more teachers and researchers are finding that student creativity and risk-taking do not directly correspond to standardized assessment. The most recent advances in electronic portfolio assessment, (e.g., Hart-Davidson, RPI; Rice, Texas Tech; Syverson, Texas; and Yancey, Clemson) however, demonstrate that communication-based writing evaluation can be developed not only in individual classrooms but also across university writing programs or throughout state education systems.

In this presentation, I will briefly sketch the practices developing in electronic portfolio systems. I will show how these methods of assessment address concerns about validity and how they change the tenor of the conversation when discussing reliability. Drawing on Brian Huot's ideas in "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment," I suggest that electronic portfolio assessment can both reinvigorate critical pedagogy and can benefit by addressing the challenges raised by Freire, hooks and Shor.

The Critique of Critical Pedagogy: Richard E. Miller "Arts of Complicity"

One of the most articulate challenges to the practice of critical pedagogy is Richard E. Miller's "Arts of Complicity." Miller argues that the veneration of Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy within postsecondary composition studies has as much to do with teachers' desires to see themselves as resisting corporations and dominant forms of cultural production as it does with students' genuine, contextualized needs. Miller writes,

> Far from being powerless, as teachers who have years of experience in this frequently capricious and indifferent system for distributing social privilege, we are actually very well positioned to assist out students in acquiring the skills necessary for persisting in the ongoing project of navigating life in a bureaucracy.

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For Miller, critical pedagogy in writing studies sells out students in favor of ideology. Or, to put it less bluntly, Miller hopes that teachers will consider the ways in which they can engage students in developing skills for "the ongoing project of navigating life in a bureaucracy."

If we look at the methods of writing assessment that are emerging in electronic portfolio systems, we see a glimmer of hope—we see the possibility that the interactive, student-centered learning advocated for by proponents of critical pedagogy can coincide with the development of communication skills that reflect the complexities of student-generated, computer-mediated compositions.

Distributive, *Interactive*, *Descriptive* and *Situated* Evaluation: Emerging Methods of Assessment in Electronic Portfolio Systems

The developing body of work on electronic writing assessment suggests that there is the possibility—perhaps even the necessity—of creating methods of *distributive*, *interactive*, *descriptive* and *situated* evaluation that reflect the risks and complexities of student-generated, computer-mediated compositions. Each of these methods of assessment reflects a growing understanding of evaluation as a process of communication. *Distribution* acknowledges that different readers will respond differently to texts and does not smooth out these differences but instead incorporates multiple and distinct responses. *Interaction* argues that assessment should include feedback and negotiation. *Description* allows a reader to respond from her experience as a reader instead of through a filter of criterion- or standards-based assessment. And *situated* readings actively work to include—rather than exclude—social contexts. None of these methods outline discrete skills or areas for measuring writing ability; rather as an

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amalgam of approaches they sketch the groundwork for treating evaluation as communication. In this manner, evaluation and assessment no longer impose abstract external standards upon students, but rather, in a classical move of critical pedagogy, challenge students to reflect on their learning and to meet the standards generated within the contexts of communication.

Assessment Theory in Composition Studies: Brian Huot's "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment"

Between 1996 and 2001, discussions about electronic portfolios began to connect assessment and computer-mediated communication in K-12 and higher education circles. Within critical pedagogy, assessment and evaluation are often seen as secondary issues to discussions about promoting social change through educational practices. However, the questions of literacy practices and social values that writers such as Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Ira Shor explore bear directly on questions of evaluation and assessment. For instance, we see the convergence of these questions in the work of Brian Huot on context-based assessment. Huot draws on the work of measurement experts such as Pamela A. Moss, Samuel Messick, and Lee Cronbach. In a study of how the material conditions of word processing affect writing assessment systems, I noted that Huot shows

> how validity has begun to move away from an empiricist notion of objectively determined accuracy toward acknowledging "the social construction of knowledge" ("Towards" 550). Huot quotes Cronbach's claim that validity "'must link concepts, evidence, social and personal consequences and values' (4)" to demonstrate the redefinition of validity within the assessment community (550). This work within the assessment community suggests links with literacy scholars'

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research and the localized writing testing programs used at the University of Pittsburgh and Washington State University (553-554). For Huot, assessment theory, literacy and reading theory and some composition testing programs suggest "emergent methods" of assessing writing that stretch older, accepted definitions of valid, reliable, and authentic assessment.

> These emergent methods can be view under a new theoretical umbrella, one supported by evolving conceptions of validity that include the consequence of the tests and a linking of instruction and practical purposes with the concept of measuring students' ability to engage in a specific literacy event or events.... These methods are sensitive to the importance of interpretation inherent in reader response and psycholinguistic theories of reading. (Huot 561)

Despite the six years that have passed since Huot articulated the basis for a "new theory of writing assessment," the uses of validity and inter-rater reliability in the literature on writing assessment have remained bound by their traditional connotations. Validity tends to mean that the assessment tool matches the content to be covered; and, reliability tends to mean that different readers will produce the same score for the same essay or type of essay across contexts. (Whithaus)

In print-based writing portfolios, authentic assessment is always situated—at least to some extent—sometimes descriptive, occasionally interactive, but almost never distributive. Assessments of student work in computer-mediated environments cannot rely on non-distributive, teacher-centered methods of evaluation if they hope to represent the complexities of student work. Assessment in computer-mediated composition spaces

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requires that we continue to push the emerging definitions of validity and reliability. It also requires that we rethink the methods of authentic assessment associated with print-based portfolios. The value of a text is tied to its use, its context, and its past; the value of an assessment system is also tied to its use, its context, and its past. The evaluation of computer-mediated compositions offers us a chance to rethink our methods of assessment and to bring these assessments into a contextualized process of communication.

Assessment Theory in K-12 Education: Eva Baker's *Understanding Educational Quality*

An interest in context-based assessment is not limited to higher education, but rather speaks directly to concerns within K-12 assessment and K-12 teaching communities. The increasing numbers of standards-based assessments imposed on students and teachers during the last five years are shaping our students' experiences of education. These experiences socialize students into passive roles and lower their expectations for the relevance of literacy education to their daily lives.[1] A move toward communication-based assessments in K-12 assessment could enable students to see themselves as active—rather than passive—agents in the construction of literacy, learning practices, and social values.

In her discussion of K-12 testing, Eva Baker notes that current systems and theories of assessment do "not meet our expectations for guiding practice and improving

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[1] Ira Shor has noted that

> language arts are constant requirements for students from elementary grades through college, making language instruction the biggest and most closely-watched enterprise in mass education. From childhood through early adulthood, official language arts help to socially construct how students see the world and act in it (Pattison; Rouse). This socialization through curriculum (what Paulo Freire called "the banking models" of pedagogy) uses assessment and instruction as vast "sorting machines," to borrow Joel Spring's metaphor.... The tradition of complaint in first-year college writing is a product of the contention faced by the status quo in reproducing itself in each new generation. ("Illegal Literacy," 105)

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learning" (15). As an expert on assessment, she makes it clear that her complaints about testing do not emerge from the usual ideological positions which resist "the capital letters TESTING INDUSTRY" and valorize "the wisdom and accuracy of classroom teachers' judgments" (15).[2] Even from her position within the testing community, Baker urges that current methods of assessment are failing to meet the needs of students, teachers, communities, and policymakers because they center on measurements of discrete skills. System validity and multipurpose testing are "heretical" ideas for the assessment community (16). Research in computer-mediated composition and electronic portfolios suggests that students draw on a variety of communication skills and interact with other writers and audience members in multifaceted ways. For the evaluations—either classroom-based or large-scale—of computer-mediated compositions to be valid and authentic, then, our assessment tools must take effective communication as their benchmark instead of discrete skill-based standards. In turn, this shift in assessment methods and criteria returns us to the questions of literacy activities and social values that underlie the work of Freire, hooks, and Shor. Teachers who use electronic portfolios incorporate principles of interaction and description into their evaluations; however, the social contexts surrounding their evaluations and the students' perspectives on each other's work have not yet altered the processes of assessment.

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[2] Baker argues that her

> thesis, that there is something wrong with our system of K-12 testing, does not flow from the same impulse as many such analyses. It is not developed as a critique of the factory model of education, the one that sees children as outputs and that is a vestige of the industrial age. It does not attack tests and their results as reductionist oddities. It does not compete with the findings of tests developed by the capital letters TESTING INDUSTRY against a sometimes more romantic view of the wisdom and accuracy of classroom teachers' judgments of their students' performance. Last, it will not deny that policymakers have the right and responsibility to demand testing programs that shed light on school progress and real policy options, and that such programs be developed on a schedule shorter than the Pleistocene era. (15)

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Assessment remains an activity based on standards established before the students begin to communicate and establish their own interpretative community. In a fully-realized model of communication-based assessment, the four characteristics or attributes need to co-exist and interrelate. In existing electronic portfolio systems, they don't. The rapid growth of electronic portfolios as tools for assessing not only student writing but also student learning across the disciplines in the last five years marks the beginnings of a shift in assessment theory and practice.

Electronic Portfolios

In 2002, we are still in the early stages of seeing how this shift will play out—and indeed, one of the questions that needs to be asked is whether assessment will shift at all or simply be more of the same. Much of the work with electronic portfolios has been based on print-based portfolio assessment work (often in writing programs) and theories of performance assessment. Electronic portfolios are used in places such as Alverno College and Kalamazoo College to present and assess student learning over the course of a college career. Electronic portfolios are used in schools of education at the University of Alaska, University of Virginia, and Ball State University as means to prepare teachers-in-training for the presentation of their own professional electronic portfolios. The ideal at Alaska, Virginia, and Ball State seems to be that the creation of teaching portfolios may drive the use of portfolios in K-12 education, and provide a basis for judging teacher accountability in relationship to student performance on standardized assessments.

Samples: Hart-Davidson, RPI; Rice, Texas Tech; Syverson, Texas; and Yancey, Clemson

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I want to pause for a moment, and make four quick references to some outstanding work on electronic portfolios. These four sources, and the electronic portfolios that they link to, provide samples that have been crucial for me in testing out how the concepts of distributive, interactive, descriptive, and situated assessment are developing:

- Bill Hart-Davidson's work at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. An overview of his work is presented in "Electronic Portfolios & Outcomes-Based Assessment: A Case Study in Building an XML Object-Model for Decision Support": http://www.rpi.edu/~hartdw/cec.ppt
- Rich Rice's dissertation "Teaching and Learning Frist-Year Composition with Digital Portfolios": http://english.ttu.edu/rice/dissertation.pdf
- M.A. Syverson's work on the Learning Record online at the University of Texas: http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~syverson/olr/
- Kathleen Blake Yancey's Introduction to the student portfolio section of the AAHE volume, *Electronic Portfolios*: http://aahe.ital.utexas.edu/electronicportfolios/TOC.html#yancey_introduction

Electronic Portfolios and the Emerging Paradigms of Assessment

Narrative or descriptive assessment has a history within American higher education. The University of California at Santa Cruz and Evergreen College have continued to employ narrative assessments instead of reductive letter grades for evaluation across the curriculum. In the context of distributive and interactive assessment in computer-mediated writing instruction, descriptive evaluation becomes even more important. As peer evaluators, students must be presented with a method of commenting on each other's work that does not simply reinstate the standards- or criterion-based method of teacher commentary they have been previously exposed to. Peter Elbow defines "criterion-based feedback [as] the kind of feedback most people are

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accustomed to—what they've usually gotten from teachers—and so it's the kind of feedback that comes most naturally to people's lips when you ask them for feedback" (*Writing With Power* 243). Since we do not yet fully understand what constitutes an effective rhetorical move in a computer-mediated composition, we can learn a lot by asking our students to describe both the criteria they are applying to electronic compositions and the ways in which they react to different electronic compositions.

Theories of composing that view writing as part of an activity system or knowledge ecology propose models where the writing process is never singular but rather situated within the interactions of multiple agents and multiple environments. Students interact with one another; students interact with their teachers; students apply ideas about effective writing learned from previous teachers, previous writing experiences; students work within and against genre expectations; students compose within physical environments—in public computer labs, on the library, in their dorm rooms. All of these factors—and more—shape the work of writing. The complexity of causal relationships and interactions that knowledge ecologies and activity theories attribute to composing processes do not lead to a paralysis in terms of research, however.

Nationally the uses of electronic portfolios both inside and outside of writing programs illustrate aspects of the evaluative methods I am advocating: distribution, interaction, description, and situated. By teasing out the theoretical basis for these methods of evaluation as well as their partial and different realizations in a variety of locations, we come to realize that we have reached a point in terms of available information technologies where we could—and need to—implement assessment methods that reflect the hybrid complexities of student language and student learning. The need to

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implement these methods of evaluation, as Eva Baker points out, is not simply a liberal or radical reaction to the dehumanizing effects of testing and assessment. Rather the pressures brought to bear by changes in the media used for literacy upon our means of reading, writing, learning, and evaluating are driving this re-evaluation of methods of assessment. A refusal to grapple with these issues will produce numerous failures in terms of assessment systems as well as in terms of students' lives. This re-evaluation is not an abstract and self-contained process. It involves all sorts of tendencies and agencies working out of different motivations and positions. The question of how to assess student work as literacy practices and media are changing is not just a question asked by teacher-researchers—it is also a question raised by advocates of raised standards and mandated assessments, business coalitions lobbying for higher standards, and boards of education and trustees. Grounding the development of evaluative methods for computer-mediated writing instruction and electronic portfolio assessment in processes that distribute responsibility among a variety of readers and situate assessment within local, social contexts could eliminate the problems of mass, large-scale assessments and the decontextualized pedagogies they encourage.

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